

RENAISSANCE ORNAMENT.

Having thus succinctly traced the historical succession of the great sculptors of Italy, all of whom, it must constantly be borne in mind, were ornamentists also, we proceed to point out some few of those lessons which may, as we conceive, be derived from a study of their works by the artist and art-workman. One of the most peculiar and most fascinating qualities of the best Cinque-cento ornament in relief is the skill with which those by whom it was wrought availed themselves of the play of light and shade produced by infinite variations of plane, not only in surfaces parallel to the grounds from which the ornament was raised, but brought to a tangent with it at ever-varying angles of impact.

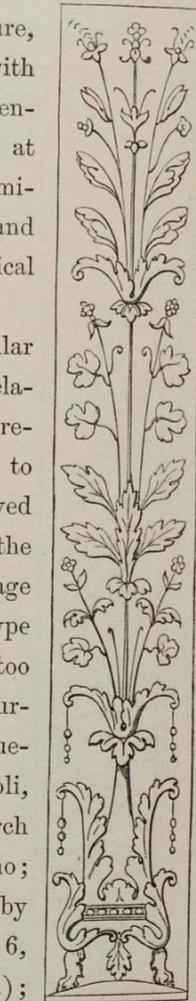
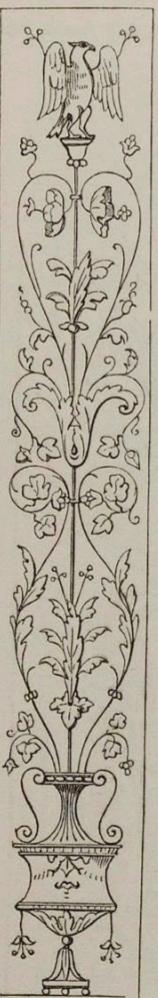
The difference in effect between a scroll of the volute form, in which the relief gradually diminishes from the starting of the volute to its eye, and one in which the relief is uniform throughout, is very great; and it is to their undeviating preference for the former over the latter, that the Cinque-cento artists are indebted for the infallibly pleasing results they attained alike in their simplest and most complicated combinations of spiral forms.

This refined appreciation of delicate shades of relief in sculpture was carried to its greatest perfection by Donatello, whose authority in matters of taste was held in the highest possible esteem by the contemporary Florentines, and whose example was followed with respect and devotion by all classes of artists. Not only was he the first to practise the *bassissimo relieveo*, in which the effect of projection and of rounded modelling is obtained within apparently impracticable limits of relief, but he was the first to combine that style of work with *mezzo* and *alto relieveo*; thus maintaining an almost pictorial division of his subject into several planes. Too good a master of his craft to ever overstep the special conventions of sculpture, Donatello enriched the Florentine practice of the Cinque-centisti with many elements derived from the sister art of Painting. These inventions—for they are almost worthy of the name, though arrived at only through a sedulous study of the Antique—were adopted and imitated with the greatest avidity by the ornamentists of the period; and hence we may trace some of the most peculiar and striking technical excellence of the best Renaissance carving and modelling.

Ultimately, and at its acme of perfection, this system of regular arrangement of ornament in planes was so ingeniously managed in relation to light and shade, that, viewed from a distance, the relieveo presented only certain points symmetrically disposed with reference to some dominant geometrical figures. An approach of a few paces served to bring to the sense of vision the lines and figures connecting the points of greatest salience. A yet nearer approach revealed the leafage and delicate tendrils necessary to convey a tangible idea of the type of nature selected for convention, while no inspection could be too close to test the artist's perfect appreciation of the refinements of surface texture. The "cisellatura," or "chasing," of the best Italian Cinque-cento ornament, such as may be seen in the Church of the Miracoli, Venice (Figs. 1, 8, 9, Plate LXXIV.), by the Lombardi; in the Church of Sta. Maria del Popolo (Fig. 1, Plate LXXVI.), Rome, by Sansovino; in the gates of the Baptistry, Florence (Fig. 3, Plate LXXV.), by Ghiberti; in the carvings of San Michele di Murano (Figs. 4, 6, Plate LXXIV.); the Scuola di San Marco (Fig. 2, Plate LXXIV.);

Small Pilasters of Marble Staircase in the Church of Sta. Maria

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Small Pilaster of
Marble
Staircase
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Popolo, Rome.



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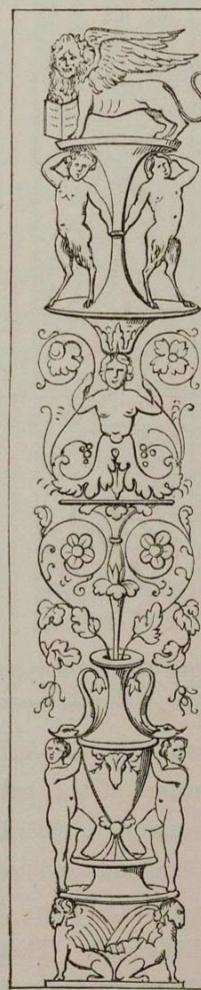
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the Scala dei Giganti (Figs. 5, 7, Plate LXXIV.); and other buildings at Venice, is beyond all praise. The fibres of a leaf or tendril are never misdirected, nor is Nature's tendency to grace in growth perverted or misapprehended. Smoothness and detail are never added excepting where they have some specific function to perform; and while labour is so prodigally bestowed as to show that every additional touch was a labour of love, it is never thrown away, as is too often the case in the present day, in converting those portions of a design which should be secondaries or tertiaries in point of interest into primaries.

In the hands of artists less profoundly impressed than was Donatello with a sense of the just limit of convention in sculpture, the importation of pictorial elements into bas-relief soon degenerated into confusion. Even the great Ghiberti marred the effect of many of his most graceful compositions by the introduction of perspective, and accessories copied too directly from nature. In many of the ornamental sculptures of the Certosa the fault is exaggerated until monuments, which should impress the spectator with grave admiration at their beauty and dignity, serve only to amuse him—resembling dolls' houses peopled by fairies, decked with garlands, hung with tablets, and fancifully overgrown with foliage, rather than serious works of Art commemorating the dead, or dedicated to sacred uses.

Another reproach which may with justice be addressed to many such monuments is the incongruity of the association of ideas connected with their purport, and those suggested by the ornaments displayed in their friezes, pilasters, panels, spandrels, and other enriched features. Tragic and comic masques, musical instruments, semi-Priapie terminals, antique altars, tripods, and vessels of libation, dancing *amorini*, and hybrid marine monsters, and chimeras, harmonise but ill with monuments reared in consecrated edifices or dedicated to religious rites. This fault, of the confusion of things sacred and profane, may not, however, be altogether justly laid upon the shoulders of the *artists* of the Renaissance, whose works served but to reflect the dominant spirit of an age in which the revival of mythologic symbolism was but a protest against the hampering trammels of ascetic tradition erected into dogmatism under the rulers of the East, and endorsed by the Church during those centuries when its ascendancy over an ignorant and turbulent population was at its greatest height. The minds of even the most religious men were imbued with such incongruous associations in the fourteenth century; and it is not necessary to go farther than the "Commedia" of Dante, which all the world of literature has designated as the *Divine Epic*, to recognise the tangled skeins of Gothic and classical inspiration with which the whole texture of contemporary literature was interwoven.

To the architect, the study of Italian Cinque-cento ornament in relief is of no less utility than it can possibly be to the sculptor, since in no style has ornament ever been better spaced out, or arranged to contrast more agreeably with the direction of the adjacent architectural lines by which it is bounded and kept in subordination. Rarely, if ever, is an ornament suitable for a horizontal position placed in a vertical one, or vice versa; and rarely, if ever, are the proportions of the ornaments and the mouldings, or the styles and rails, by which regularity and symmetry are given to the whole, at variance with one another. In Plates LXXIV., LXXV., and LXXVI., are collected a series



Small Pilaster of the Giant's
Staircase, in the Palae,
Venice, by Benedetto and
Domenico da Mantua.

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